

Flowing Narratives, Erased Voices: The Politics of Language and Power Dynamics in A.K. Ramanujan's 'A River'

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 4

Month: May

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Kumar, Chethan.
"Flowing Narratives,
Erased Voices: The
Politics of Language
and Power Dynamics
in A.K. Ramanujan's
'A River.'" *Shanlax
International Journal
of Arts, Science and
Humanities*, vol. 12,
no. S4, 2025,
pp. 123–25

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12iS4.May-9167>

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Abstract

A.K. Ramanujan's poem "A River" serves as a powerful critique of the politics of language and the power dynamics inherent in poetic representation. The research paper examines the narratives, including the great canon of Sangam literature, which neglected the marginal voices and silenced the sufferings of common in the flow of literary tradition. The article further explores how language is used to include or exclude certain narratives. By juxtaposing the idealized river of the past with the stark realities of the present, Ramanujan exposes how language can be used to silence marginalized voices. Ultimately, the paper argues that "A River" is not merely a poem about a natural phenomenon but a profound commentary on the responsibility of poets to bear witness to the full spectrum of human experience

Keywords: Sangam literature, literary narratives, neglected voices, politics of language

Introduction

A K Ramanujan's poem "A River" is important in modern Indian poetry, which critically examines the politics of language and power dynamics. The poem contrasts the romanticizing of the Vaigai river, in classic Tamil poetry, particularly in Sangam literature with the present realities of human suffering. The poem offers a critical examination of language politics and how literary narratives are selective, which decides whose voices can be heard and whose can be erased. The research paper critically examines all the above-mentioned themes.

Analysis

The Politics of Language

Language is the medium of culture, history, and traditional practices of human beings. It is also the center of power, politics, and ideology. The poet criticizes the older poets who describe only the romantic side of the river and its grandeur in the monsoon but fail to recount the sufferings that are caused by it. The poem opens with a reference to older poets who "sang only of the floods," focusing on the river's beauty and grandeur while omitting the devastation it brings (Ramanujan, *The Collected Poems*, 1995). The politics of language is clearly on the show when those poets highlight the prioritize aesthetics over empathy, using language to construct idealized narratives that erase uncomfortable truths.

Ramanujan questions the language of fairness in describing the river, instead, he insists on looking keenly at the human and animal cost of the flood, which causes suffering by throwing the light on a pregnant woman and two cows named Gopi and Brinda. This harsh reality highlights the politics of language—how it can be used to include or exclude, to romanticize or confront.

Sangam Literature and the Romanticized River

Sangam literature, an ancient literary gathering in and around Madurai and one of the earliest bodies of Tamil poetry explores several aspects of life, including nature poetry in which rivers are often depicted as symbols of beauty, fertility, and life. For example, rivers are described as “dancing” or “swelling with pride,” emphasizing their grandeur and vitality (Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan*, 1973). This reflects a worldview in which nature is harmoniously integrated with human life.

On the other side of nature, it covers the darker life of human and animal suffering. Unfortunately, the great literary canon and the contemporary poets failed to shed light on it. Ramanujan criticizes the new poets for their inability to talk about human suffering and for following the old generation poets.

New-Age Poets and the Critique of Romanticization

In the new-coming age, poets are often seen critiquing the traditional poets romanticizing their writing, and addressing the dark realities of human suffering which the older poets failed to reflect in their time. These new-age poets often center the voices of the marginalized, such as the poor, women, and children. This reflects a broader shift in literature toward addressing social and political issues, including the politics of language and representation.

Ramanujan’s “A River” is part of this tradition. Instead of its grandeur, the poet sheds light on trash, garbage, and the stingy side of the river. By critiquing the romanticized narratives of traditional poetry and focusing on the human cost of the flood, Ramanujan challenges the authority of traditional narratives and asserts the importance of marginalized voices and the value of human and animal life.

Ramanujan’s View of the Present River

The poet’s view of a river is influenced by the human cost and critique of traditional poetry, which describes the beautiful side of floods.

Ramanujan’s description of the washed-out houses, drowned cows, and pregnant woman and her unborn twins is a powerful critique of the erasure of suffering in traditional poetry. This reflects his commitment to using language as a tool for truth-telling and social critique. By centering the narrative of the drowned woman, Ramanujan challenges the authority of traditional narratives and asserts the importance of marginalized voices.

Conclusion

A.K. Ramanujan’s “A River” is a significant observation of the politics of language and the power dynamics of poetic representation. By critiquing the romanticized narratives of traditional poetry and focusing on the human cost of the flood, Ramanujan challenges the authority of traditional narratives and asserts the importance of marginalized voices. His poetry becomes a space for resistance, bearing witness to the full spectrum of human experience and reclaiming the stories that have been erased. Ultimately, “A River” is not merely a poem about a natural phenomenon but a call for a more empathetic and truthful approach to storytelling.

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